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# Spinoza's Rejection of Maimonideanism

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## CHAPTER 4

*Spinoza's rejection of Maimonideanism*

Steven Frankel

According to the prevailing view among contemporary scholars, Maimonides and Spinoza share so much in common that in order to understand Spinoza, one must first recognize his debt to Maimonides. Spinoza's profound kinship with Maimonides is revealed by his adoption of the terms of medieval theology (form, essence, mode, attribute, substance, etc.), and also its goals (*amor Dei intellectualis*).<sup>1</sup> Spinoza, according to this view, simply carried the arguments of Maimonides to their logical conclusions.<sup>2</sup> At first glance, this is surprising since Maimonides presents himself as a defender of revelation, while Spinoza launches a devastating critique of Scripture and its defenders, particularly Maimonides. But according to contemporary scholars, such differences can be explained as the result of political accommodations to their respective audiences.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Zev Harvey argues that Spinoza "was a Maimonidean in the sense that fundamental elements of Maimonides' philosophy recur as fundamental elements of his philosophy."<sup>4</sup> Their kinship is obscured because Maimonides addresses a Jewish audience while Spinoza addresses a

I wish to thank Timothy Sean Quinn and Marc Cohen for their helpful comments and criticisms.

<sup>1</sup> For more on Spinoza's debt to the Jewish tradition, see Nadler 1999, 114ff.

<sup>2</sup> The attempt to assimilate the views of Maimonides with those of Spinoza generally takes the form of the claim that "Spinoza's position is a logical outcome of Maimonides or that Maimonides at least leaves the door open for Spinoza" (Batniksky 2003–2004, 517). Steven Nadler suggests that Spinoza's denial of personal immortality is "simply the logical culmination" of Maimonides' view of the soul (Nadler 2001, 95, 130).

<sup>3</sup> "Made of sterner stuff and living a few centuries later, Spinoza would have perhaps demanded the overthrow of the old order with its effete institutions so as to build upon its ruins a new society . . . But being what he was and living at a time when belief in the potency of reformation had not yet been shaken by doubt, he chose to follow in the footsteps of rationalizers throughout history. The story of this rationalization is the story of his TTP" (see Wolfson 1934, 333). Wolfson asserts that Spinoza's "reputed God-intoxication was really nothing but a hang-over of an earlier religious jag" (348). Richard McKeon treats Spinoza as the last of the scholastics (McKeon 1928).

<sup>4</sup> See Harvey 1981, 172. Similarly, Shlomo Pines asserts that Spinoza "does Maimonides the honour, rarely or never vouchsafed to him in modern times, to disprove him . . . [H]e is able to do this because he is prepared to adopt some of the presuppositions of Maimonides. He also pays [Maimonides] the, in a sense, greater compliment of adapting some of his ideas" (Pines 1968, 3).

Christian one. David Biale offers an interesting variation on this theme. He argues that Spinoza generally follows Maimonides though he is not concerned with the juridical deficiencies of the rabbinic tradition; nonetheless, Spinoza – whom Biale refers to as “Maimonides’ stepson” – built his rational faith on Maimonidean foundations.<sup>5</sup> Spinoza thought he was breaking radically from the Jewish tradition. In hindsight, we can see what Spinoza could not, namely that his “arguments are squarely in the Maimonidean tradition.”<sup>6</sup>

But there is also reason to be skeptical of such claims. For one thing, Spinoza may have had his own reasons for overstating his kinship with Maimonides. He may have wished, for example, to adopt the appearance of a pious heir to the medieval tradition to distract readers from the overall effect of his analysis, which is to undermine revelation. As Martin Yaffe suggests, Spinoza puts “new wine in old bottles that still bear their original labels along with traces of the original contents.”<sup>7</sup> Hobbes too was struck by the boldness of Spinoza’s critique of religion rather than his debt to medieval philosophy or Maimonides.<sup>8</sup> According to Leo Strauss, Spinoza’s appropriation of Maimonides to advance his own very different theological-political program was “amazingly unscrupulous” and ruthlessly Machiavellian.<sup>9</sup> Along these same lines, Joshua Parens argues, as the title of his book *Maimonides and Spinoza: Their Conflicting Views of Human Nature* suggests, that the “main value to be derived from studying Maimonides is to gain distance from our own world and viewpoint, which has been so deeply shaped by the thought of Spinoza.”<sup>10</sup>

The goal of this chapter is to show that the causes of this scholarly disagreement and the difficulty in assessing the relation between Spinoza and Maimonides reflect Spinoza’s own contradictory treatment of Maimonides. In Chapter 5 of the TTP he criticizes Maimonides for giving too much authority to the Bible at the expense of reason; in Chapter 7, he criticizes Maimonides for giving too much authority to reason. The contradiction is exacerbated by the fact that Spinoza seems guilty of espousing the very position that he criticizes: he appears to give too much authority to the Bible when he offers a set of theological dogmas and insists that all decent men (*honestos*) submit to them.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, he insists in his

<sup>5</sup> Biale 2011, 29. <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. <sup>7</sup> Spinoza 2004, 253.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of Aubrey’s famous account of Hobbes and his reaction to the TTP, see Curley 1992.

<sup>9</sup> See Strauss 1968, 244: “Spinoza’s critique is directed against the whole body of authoritative teachings and rules known in Spinoza’s time as Judaism” (253).

<sup>10</sup> See Parens 2012, 1. <sup>11</sup> TTP 14, Spinoza 1925, III.177; 2004, 164.

critique of miracles (in Chapter 6) that the Bible's teaching reflects a profound ignorance of nature and can be safely put aside. As we shall see, Spinoza adopts a novel view of the relation between reason and revelation that explains this contradiction and exposes his estrangement from Maimonides.

### Spinoza's critique(s) of Maimonides

Spinoza examines Maimonides' position at length, quoting him twice in the TTP in Chapters 5 and 7. The first quote comes from Maimonides' popular text, the *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Melachim*), to the effect that the decision to submit to the Noahide laws, and more generally to revelation, is valid only on the grounds that they are commanded by God.<sup>12</sup> A person who accepts them because they are consistent with reason, according to Maimonides,<sup>13</sup> such a person is neither pious nor has a share in the world to come. The laws of Noah resemble natural law inasmuch as they apply to all mankind ("the children of Noah"). But unlike natural law, their force comes from a covenant with God reported in Genesis 9, and not from reason's recognition of their truth. Even though reason and revelation point to the same universal law, they arrive at this law in different ways and this difference is decisive: faith and salvation involve obedience to the divine law; reason does not obey any law but consents only to what it understands. (Spinoza presents a similar argument on behalf of the separation of reason and revelation in Chapter 15 of the TTP.) As we shall see, when we turn to the context of this critique, the substance of the disagreement virtually disappears altogether.<sup>14</sup>

Spinoza prefaces his remarks on Maimonides with a sketch of his political teaching: men need to live in communities for the sake of security and comfort, and were they fully rational, they would recognize this necessity and act in accordance with it. Unfortunately, "human nature is constituted quite otherwise. All men do seek their own advantage, but hardly on the basis of the dictates of sound reason."<sup>15</sup> The purpose of government, therefore, is to check men's passions and compel them to behave peacefully.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to keep in mind that Spinoza's primary audience is not the Jewish community, but rather the Protestant community as he encountered it in Holland. Maimonides can be read as a less provocative stand-in for scriptural interpreters such as Ludwig Meyer; see Preus 2001, 37.

<sup>13</sup> According to Joseph Caro, the passage expresses not only Maimonides' personal opinion but also that of the Jewish tradition; see Strauss 1968, 248–249.

<sup>14</sup> Spinoza's use of this passage infuriated the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen, who wished to establish the universalism of Jewish ethics. For a fuller discussion of Cohen's position see *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> TTP 5, Spinoza 1925, III.73; 2004, 59.

Spinoza also explains that the role of government is not to educate men and make them more reasonable. Although the exertion of power by government is necessary and even beneficial, men resent such compulsion.<sup>16</sup> This is the case “least of all,” Spinoza writes, when they are “serving their equals and being regulated by them.”<sup>17</sup> Men do not resent all authority, for example, if they are persuaded of the superiority of the sovereign. But for irrational men, only miracle workers or prophets are capable of persuading the multitude of their superiority.<sup>18</sup> Short of such “demonstrations,” resentment will throw a state into perpetual turmoil, with its subjects rooting for its downfall.

Spinoza introduces his own political theology to dramatize the problem and suggest a solution. The Israelites did not resent the authority of Moses because it was rooted in compelling claims about the divine and promises of reward, which kept the Israelites in awe of Moses’ political power. Moses astutely perceived the political backwardness of this nation – “a people incapable of self-rule” – and prescribed a fitting system of law which eliminated all freedom of thought and choice. He crafted a law so that every action and decision “admonished them to obedience always” and, thanks to a ceremonial law, even their “own decree” would not be free.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the Mosaic regime, the Gospels teach that Christ frees all nations from the Mosaic law in favor of another divine law, the hallmark of which is the free or voluntary submission to its authority:

Paul concludes that, since God is the God of all nations, that is, is equally propitious to all, and since all men equally live under the law and under sin, therefore God sent his Christ to all nations, to free all men equally from the slavery of the law, so that they might no longer act by the command of the law, but by the steadfast decree of the spirit. Accordingly Paul teaches precisely what we mean.<sup>20</sup>

The essence of a living faith is freedom, that is, the decision to obey the divine law enumerated in Scripture according to one’s “free will.”<sup>21</sup> While Judaism is

<sup>16</sup> See Gilden 1973, 377–387. <sup>17</sup> TTP 5, Spinoza 1925, III.74; 2004, 59.

<sup>18</sup> “Men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands, because seeing is given to everyone, touching to few. Everyone sees how you appear, few touch what you are; and these few dare not to oppose the opinion of the many, who have the majesty of the state to defend them” (in Machiavelli 1998, 71). Spinoza’s emphasis on freedom throughout the TTP refers to political freedom, that is, the ability to pursue one’s passions and desires and not action in accord with reason.

<sup>19</sup> TTP 5, Spinoza 1925, III.76; 2004, 61. For a powerful response (and defense of Judaism), see Levinas 1990, 111–118. Levinas claims that Spinoza’s account of Judaism as an “inevitable stage on the road to truth” encouraged Western Jewish intellectuals to view Judaism merely as a primitive stage in the human search for truth. See also Cohen 1924, 290–372.

<sup>20</sup> TTP 3, Spinoza 1925, III.54; 2004, 39. For more details on this theology of freedom, see Frankel 2002, 273–296.

<sup>21</sup> TTP 5, Spinoza 1925, III.75, 76; 2004, 60, 61.

characterized by constant obedience, a solution which is barely preferable to slavery (and only because it commands obedience to a *divine* master), Christianity is marked by its freedom from the law.<sup>22</sup> Christians need not obey any ceremonial law; its teachings are universal and manifest to the “natural light of reason” rather than the revelation of a particular political or ceremonial law.<sup>23</sup> In short, Christianity is characterized by freedom and self-determination which is expressed most clearly in the rational recognition of the truth.

The problem with rational freedom is that it is not available to the people that it purports to save. Universal faith involves reasoning based on empirical grounds, that is, “from what sense perception tells [us] occurs in nature,” or “on the basis of self-evident intellectual axioms” and the careful deductions from those axioms. Because most people do not have the patience, care, or intelligence to deduce a long series of propositions from self-evident axioms, this natural or rational basis of faith is largely irrelevant to the political problem (that to live in communities, men need compulsion yet resent and resist it). As Spinoza argues in the *Political Treatise*,

[T]he road which reason teaches us to follow is very steep, so that those who believe that ordinary people or those who are busily engaged in public business can be persuaded to live solely at reason's behest are dreaming of the golden age of the Poets or a myth.<sup>24</sup>

Spinoza suggests an alternative solution to the political problem. Scripture presents a teaching regarding “philosophic matters” presented in an easy-to-grasp historical narrative that requires no special training or intellectual ability to understand.<sup>25</sup> He concludes that although such

<sup>22</sup> “God is the God of all nations, i.e. since He is equally propitious to all, and since all were equally under the law and sin, [therefore] God sent to all nations His Christ, who would free all equally of bondage to the law” (TTP 3, Spinoza 1925, III.54; 2004, 39). In contrast to Moses, the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus was free of any defective knowledge of God: “If Moses spoke with God face to face, as a man speaks with his friend (*i.e.*, by means of their two bodies), Christ communicated with God mind to mind” (TTP 1, Spinoza 1925, III.21; 2004, 7).

<sup>23</sup> TTP 5, Spinoza 1925, III.76; 2004, 61.

<sup>24</sup> See TP 1, Spinoza 1925, III.275; 2000, 35–36, also see *Ethics* Vp42s on the difficulty of following reason, and *Ethics* Vp1–p10s on the ability of reason to moderate the passions. According to *Ethics* IVp4dem, a human being cannot be fully self-caused and therefore he “is necessarily always subject to passions.”

<sup>25</sup> “[T]he greatest authority to interpret Scripture . . . must not be so difficult that it can be directed by the most acute Philosophers, but must be accommodated to the natural and common mental cast and capacity of men, as we have shown ours to be” (TTP 7, Spinoza 1925, III.117; 2004, 101). Mignini argues that reason can never have very much control over the passions and therefore religion is always necessary, even for rational men: “[T]he imagination is the instrument and impassable limit of fortune; if it is founded upon the relation between the human body and other bodies, as the representative structure of *affectiones*, one can understand why Spinoza affirmed that reason, considered as true knowledge, has no power of the imagination and can do nothing against the course of fortune and the emotions which it produces” (Mignini 1984, 130).

narratives cannot provide knowledge of the truth, they can instill true opinions, for example, they can “still teach and enlighten men as much is sufficient for impressing obedience and devotion in their spirits.”<sup>26</sup> Just before his critique of Maimonides, and in keeping with his account of Christianity as a faith characterized by freedom and rationality, Spinoza ostensibly adopts the Maimonidean view on the relation of reason and revelation. According to this view, Scripture presents the truths of reason in an imaginative language accessible to non-philosophers so that their lives are consistent with the teachings of reason. Of course, this does not fully cure them of superstition; nonetheless, they can still enjoy some measure of blessedness thanks to the compelling narratives of the Gospels.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Spinoza’s criticism of Maimonides in Chapter 5 is hardly intended as a rejection of the Maimonidean strategy of using the Bible to teach and edify the multitude. Rather, Spinoza’s problem with Maimonides is limited to a particular defect of his theology, namely that it provides insufficient warrant for a universal faith. Even here, Maimonides is not fully to blame since he was forced to work within the confines of a highly particular theology to develop a religion with universal scope. A Spinoza quote from the *Mishneh Torah* confirms this view:

*Everyone* who takes to heart the [Noahide laws] and diligently follows them, belongs to *the pious of nations* and is heir to the world to come . . . [if] he follows them because God has ordained them in his Law . . . But if he follows them through the guidance of reason, he is not a dweller among the pious nor among *the wise of the nations*.<sup>28</sup>

For Maimonides, the covenant with Noah represents Scripture’s universal teaching, and such a covenant cannot be established on the basis of reason, but only on obedience to revelation. Spinoza’s criticism here concerns merely a theological difference with Maimonides: if Scripture has a universal teaching, it should not be confined to a particular tradition but accessible

<sup>26</sup> TTP 5, Spinoza 1925, III.77–78; 2004, 63. Spinoza candidly admits that faith “cannot give us the knowledge and love of God . . . [but] is very useful with a view to civil life. For the more we have observed and the better we know the character and circumstances of men . . . the better will we be able to live more cautiously among them and accommodate our lives to their disposition as much as reason suggests” (TTP 4, Spinoza 1925, III.62; 2004, 46). David Lachterman suggests that the TTP retranslates a scientific concept of law back into the human domain so that the “pre-scientific understanding of law, legislation, legislators, obedience and disobedience can all be intelligently derived” (Lachterman 1991, 132).

<sup>27</sup> Steven Smith argues that Spinoza’s positive presentation of Christianity “was dictated not by the methods of historical philology but by the need to gain genuine support for his universal religion of tolerance”: Smith 1997, 105.

<sup>28</sup> TTP 5, Spinoza 1925, III.79–80; 2004, 64–65. I have added emphasis to the phrases which show the universal breadth of Maimonides’ declaration.



to everyone.<sup>29</sup> Such access is possible only with a theology of freedom as is found in the Gospels, a teaching rooted in reason as the only sure path to blessedness. Despite this theological difference, Spinoza's critique of Maimonides reinforces their agreement on the irrationality of the multitude and their need for guidance. Spinoza also concurs with Maimonides that Scripture represents a practical solution to the problem of superstition, a solution made possible by the fact that reason teaches the very freedom celebrated in the Gospels. In Spinoza's interpretation, the Gospels liberate men from the Mosaic law and make possible a universal law.<sup>30</sup>

Given their overall agreement, it is surprising that when Spinoza returns to Maimonides in Chapter 7, he describes the Maimonidean approach to Scripture as "harmful, useless, and absurd."<sup>31</sup> His goal is nothing less than the annihilation (Spinoza uses the conjugated verb *explodimus*) of the Maimonidean method of interpretation. In contrast to his Maimonidean treatment of the Gospels in Chapter 5, Spinoza now urges restraint in explaining the meaning of Scripture and questions whether the text even has a single consistent teaching or the ultimate truth. He insists that the Bible be approached with the same caution as any ancient historical document, and in particular that we should not project foreign or imagined views onto Scripture.<sup>32</sup> One of the most egregious violations of this caution is

<sup>29</sup> Scripture is one of many, and perhaps not the most important, sources for theology. Hence, Spinoza asserts that "belief in historical narratives of any kind whatsoever has nothing to do with the Divine Law": TTP 5, Spinoza 1925, III.79; 2004, 64.

<sup>30</sup> In order to appreciate the meaning of political freedom and how it leads to peace, we must distinguish it from both slavery and true freedom. True freedom – "he alone is free who lives with a full spirit solely on the basis of the guidance of reason" – is not politically relevant because such rationality is unavailable to most men. Slavery, of course, is the opposite of freedom but, according to Spinoza, it is not simply a matter of living in obedience to another's command (TTP 16, Spinoza 1925, III.194; 2004, 184). Rather the slave lives in obedience to commands that are not useful to himself. In contrast, the politically free individual or subject obeys commands – and in this sense is not free – but since those commands are for the benefit of the subject, he obeys them willingly. This willful obedience is the hallmark of political freedom. Obedience to law is freedom in a political sense because political authority depends in part on my perception of a harmony between my interests and the interests of the community. Freedom, particularly in a democracy, is the most stable and secure regime because it appears to accord most closely with my perception of my own conatus as freedom of will. As Spinoza remarks: a liberal democratic state "seems the most natural and to go along most with the freedom that nature grants to each" (emphasis added; TTP 16, Spinoza 1925, III.195; 2004, 185). The seeming freedom of liberal democracy is Spinoza's political theology. As with his biblical theology, Spinoza leaves us free to interpret it according to our capacity. Many individuals will undoubtedly see political freedom as the highest type of freedom, sanctioned by nature. Others will recognize that such freedom is an illusion, but is nonetheless the most effective superstition for producing political security and stability.

<sup>31</sup> TTP 7, Spinoza 1925, III.116; 2004, 100.

<sup>32</sup> Spinoza reports that Jewish theologians commonly hold the view that Scripture has infinitely many profound meanings, that everything in Scripture from the ancient marks above the letters to the contradictions within the narrative, is fraught with meaning (TTP 9, Spinoza 1925, III.140; 2004, 126). But if Scripture has infinite meaning, the result can be only infinite quarreling: "For if



Maimonides' claim that the prophets "were the most acute Philosophers" who grasped the truth of things.<sup>33</sup> After characterizing Christianity as teaching freedom consistent with rationality in Chapter 5, it would appear that Spinoza has violated his own rule and imposed a philosophical meaning onto scripture.

To grasp the meaning of Spinoza's critique of Maimonides in Chapter 7, we must clarify its purpose. Spinoza certainly does not reject Maimonides' views regarding the superiority of reason, or the rejection of religious and pagan superstitions. Rather, the issue concerns the authority of reason among the multitude. Spinoza insists that most men will not recognize the authority of reason or defer to the wisdom of philosophers. Maimonides' hermeneutic, in Spinoza's interpretation, attempts to establish covertly the authority of reason in politics by installing a "new type of priest," a philosopher who is adept at portraying rational truths in imaginative language.<sup>34</sup> To do this, Maimonides slyly suggests that regardless of the literal meaning of Scripture, there is a deeper, rational level to its teachings. The problem with this hermeneutical strategy is that it undermines, and ultimately dislodges, the literal sense of Scripture and thereby destroys "the certainty about the sense of Scripture which the vulgar can have by a straightforward reading . . ." <sup>35</sup> As a result, the meaning of Scripture is thrown open to superstitious speculation. Maimonides' superstitious followers concluded "that reason has to serve as the handmaid of Scripture, and submit to it completely."<sup>36</sup>

In contrast, Spinoza outlines an effective hermeneutical method which is accessible to the multitude.<sup>37</sup> This method accepts the literal meaning of the

interpreting Scripture in their mode were permitted everywhere, there would surely be no speech whose true sense we could not doubt" (TTP 10, Spinoza 1925, III.148; 2004, 135). Such a view serves those polemical theologians who are interested in promoting superstitious speculations about the meaning of Scripture. To be sure, Spinoza's method opens up the same possibilities, but not for superstitious speculations.

<sup>33</sup> TTP 5, Spinoza 1925, III.117; 2004, 101.

<sup>34</sup> In the Maimonidean solution, the wisdom for combining reason and revelation presumably moderates the political ambitions of the theologians and, at the same time, alleviates the resentment which attends all communities. Spinoza rejects this not only because passionate individuals stubbornly resist reason, but also because he doubts that reason can moderate either the political ambitions or superstitious tendencies of priests. See Frankel 1999, 897–924.

<sup>35</sup> TTP 7, Spinoza 1925, III.116; 2004, 100.

<sup>36</sup> TTP 15, Spinoza 1925, III.181; 2004, 169–170. Here, Spinoza refers apparently to the so-called Maimonidean controversy which began with the publication of the *Guide* in the twelfth century, which Menachem Kellner describes as "an event of major social and political significance, shaking the Jewish communities of Spain, Provence, and even France for well over one hundred years." See Kellner's account, which accords by in large with Spinoza's description, in Kellner 1991, 79.

<sup>37</sup> Spinoza devises a straightforward historical method for the interpretation of Scripture: "the universal rule in interpreting Scripture is to attribute nothing to Scripture as its teaching [*nihil Scripturae tanquam eius documentum tribuere*] which we have not understood as clearly as possible from its history" (TTP 7, Spinoza 1925, III.99; 2004, 85).

text even if it contradicts reason or seems absurd to philosophers. In addition, the method must explain the most important passages and the central teachings of Scripture, i.e. those that deal with salvation. As for the other, more obscure passages, "there is no reason why we should be so worried about the remaining things."<sup>38</sup> The Bible may contain irrational elements, but the critical teachings for our salvation are clear. Spinoza adds in a telling phrase that "in this perception" (*in hac perceptione*) the vulgar willingly acquiesce. He means by this that the vulgar believe they can grasp, without the help of interpreters, the critical teachings of Scripture on salvation.

But Spinoza's critique of Maimonides is not confined only to the problematic aspects of the Maimonidean hermeneutic. The failure to enlighten the multitude betrays a deeper, more serious problem with the political analysis that undergirds the project. Nor is this problem confined to Maimonides. Despite overwhelming evidence of the permanence of superstition in political life, philosophers cling to the belief that the goal of politics should be to make citizens rational or intellectually virtuous. They continue to imagine impossible political regimes, where reason rules and enlightens the multitude. This belief that reason could somehow gain political authority has rendered political philosophy ineffective and useless. Spinoza reports that philosophers

have never conceived a theory of politics which could be turned to use, but such as might be taken for a chimera, or might have been formed in Utopia . . . As in all sciences, which have a useful application, so especially in that of politics, theory is supposed to be at variance with practice; and no men are esteemed less fit to direct public affairs than theorists or philosophers.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to philosophers, statesmen have the practical task of directing the passions, and this requires seeing political life more truly, that is, without reference to reason. Such individuals – and here Spinoza seems to have in mind Machiavelli – "have written about politics far more effectively than philosophers."<sup>40</sup> Rather than judge politics and condemn "cunning

<sup>38</sup> TTP 7, Spinoza 1925, III.111; 2004, 96. <sup>39</sup> TP 1, Spinoza 1925, III.273; 2000, 33.

<sup>40</sup> "[L]aw givers, with a view to exacting general obedience, have wisely set up another end, one very different from that which necessarily follows from the nature of the laws by promising to the upholders of the laws what the vulgar love most, and on the other hand, by threatening those who would violate them what the vulgar fear most" (TTP 4, Spinoza 1925, III.59; 2004, 44). Using hope and fear, that is, by appealing to men's strongest passions rather than their intellect, legislators have "wisely" found a way to restrain the multitude and prescribe to them a manner of living. See also TTP 14, Spinoza 1925, III.178; 2004, 165 and *Ethics* Vp41s: "If men did not have this hope and fear, but believed instead that minds die with the body, and that the wretched, exhausted with the burden of morality, cannot look forward to a life to come, they would return to their natural disposition, and would prefer to govern all their actions according to lust and to obey fortune rather than themselves."

and astute” statesman according to the standard of rationality, philosophers must instead learn to appreciate how statesman use the passions to create a stable unity or agreement among chronically superstitious citizens.<sup>41</sup> The proper task for philosophy is to learn and appreciate effective practice from non-rational statesmen.

### Spinoza’s restatement of the political problem

If Spinoza rejects Maimonideanism in Chapter 7, why does he use theology to support his own political agenda? Why does he portray Christianity as a religion of liberation? In fact, a closer look at Spinoza’s theology shows that he does not present the theology of freedom as identical to the teachings of philosophy. As we shall see, his theology of freedom is no less superstitious than the belief in the Mosaic law. The belief in freedom is not a substitute for philosophy, nor does it contribute to the Enlightenment of the multitude. Instead, his theology conscientiously benefits the multitude by embracing superstitions that contribute to the stability and security of society.

The starting point of Spinoza’s political thought is his famous doctrine of the *conatus*, that all things in nature seek to maintain an equilibrium of their parts and preserve their whole being.<sup>42</sup> The human manifestation of *conatus* is more complex because our perception of our being is partly conscious and involves beliefs about the objects of our desires and fears. Indeed, the status of these desires and fears is central to our perception of our *conatus*. Even though such perceptions are very likely erroneous – particularly the belief that I free to choose a strategy for preserving – nothing in nature has greater authority or is more compelling to me than my own evaluation of my *conatus*. Reason has little power over these evaluations. Spinoza does not deny that philosophers can offer better strategies for self-preservation, but this is irrelevant to political life where “[e]ach deems that he alone knows everything, and wants everything to be modified on the basis of his own mental cast, and figures something is equitable or inequitable . . . insofar as he judges it to fall to his profit or harm”<sup>43</sup>

The primacy of the *conatus* and its tenuous relation to reason explains the unwillingness of the multitude to defer to philosophers or, for that matter, any authority. The suspicion of authority, even in the garb of reason and

<sup>41</sup> TP VI, III, IV, Spinoza 1925, III.291, 287, 293; 2000, 64, 51, 58. <sup>42</sup> *Ethics* IIIp6–9, IVp22–26.

<sup>43</sup> TTP 17, Spinoza 1925, III.203; 2004, 193. Also see TTP 16, Spinoza 1925, III.190; 2004, 180: “The natural right of every man is thus determined, not by sound reason, but by desire and power.” Spinoza’s account of human action is developed in E III, especially propositions 28–39. See also Skulsky 2009, 121–129.

philosophy, is reinforced by our experience and knowledge. Everyone – including the self-proclaimed philosopher – is concerned first and foremost with his own preservation, and is willing to employ any means, including deception, to secure it.<sup>44</sup> The primacy of my pursuit of my own self-preservation as I see fit is the basis for the enduring belief in equality. Were all men rational, the fact that there are better and worse strategies for self-preservation would naturally translate into greater authority for the wise. Unfortunately, reason is not equally distributed; to put it in Spinoza's memorable words, the sane have as much right as the insane.<sup>45</sup> Without natural sanction, the wise have no authority to decide what is best for others. This limitation forces us to lower the goal of politics, abandoning moral or intellectual perfection which is at best available only to a few, in favor of security and comfort, the benefit of which all men recognize.

The Maimonidean dream of making men rational serves only to distract us from the actual gulf between reason and passion which persists in political life.<sup>46</sup> This chasm becomes apparent when we perceive that the very terms men commonly invoke in political life are imaginings, the result of inadequate ideas. By exposing this fact, and showing our moral vocabulary to be illusory, reason corrodes the stability of actual regimes and contributes to their political and intellectual chaos. The TTP presents the most politically relevant examples of this chasm between inadequate and adequate ideas that separate philosophers from the many. The concept of "law" as an adequate idea, for instance, refers to those effects "which follow necessarily from the very nature or definition of a thing."<sup>47</sup> True laws are scientific descriptions of the universal and determined causal relations which explain all of nature. A philosopher perceives the "true object" of nature's laws and therewith the best manner of living. Such a rational being follows the law voluntarily since he recognizes that its aim is none other than happiness.

But this concept of happiness is irrelevant politically because most people "are completely ignorant of how things are really ordered and connected."<sup>48</sup> For the many, "it is better to consider things as open possibilities, and to consider law as created by men."<sup>49</sup> This notion is based on a framework of

<sup>44</sup> TP II, Spinoza 1925, III.280; 2000, 42. "The highest law of nature is that each thing endeavor, as much as is in it, to persevere in its state – and do so without regard to anything but itself" (TTP 16, Spinoza 1925, III.189; 2004, 179).

<sup>45</sup> The recognition of inequality of wisdom, that others have better strategies for self-preservation, is the starting point for education. The inability of most people to recognize this fact helps explain Spinoza's pessimism about educating the multitude.

<sup>46</sup> TP II, IV, Spinoza 1925, III.282, 284, 292–294; 2000, 45, 47, 58–60.

<sup>47</sup> TTP 4, Spinoza 1925, III.57; 2004, 43. <sup>48</sup> TTP 4, Spinoza 1925, III.58; 2004, 44.

<sup>49</sup> TTP 4, Spinoza 1925, III.58; 2004, 44.

inadequate ideas, including will and freedom. When human beings issue political laws, they presume the existence of an undetermined domain within which our choices are meaningful. This domain applies only to “the mind’s perception of things”; or more specifically, to our inadequate ideas of our relation to other things. The realm of political authority involves concepts such as justice, law, right, and freedom which are illusory and impossible to harmonize with reason.<sup>50</sup>

The political problem, as Spinoza presents it, involves uniting non-rational citizens around a conceptual framework of justice, a concept which is itself neither natural or rational.<sup>51</sup> To achieve stability and peace among self-seeking individuals involves directing passions and interests so that people see the community as enhancing their interests or power. This is not a matter of educating the citizens about the true definition of justice or the greatest good or making the moral framework of political life consistent with rationality.<sup>52</sup> Such efforts will not contribute to the stability of the state; rather, the state must convince citizens that its power contributes to their own pursuit of self-preservation.<sup>53</sup> As Edwin Curley observes, “the problem of forming a society with any chance of enduring becomes the problem of designing a society whose members will continue to perceive it to be useful to them.”<sup>54</sup> The political problem can be understood in terms of encouraging citizens to obey, by manipulating their perception of the legitimacy and usefulness of the state. A careful

<sup>50</sup> Douglas Den Uyl, responding to Smith’s claim that democracy fosters rationality, makes a similar point: “Political action is never active in Spinoza’s sense, and the effort to make it such carries with it confusions that can translate into social conflict. Politics for Spinoza has a simple limited function that in itself has nothing to do with perfection, activity, or blessedness . . . The best we could say is that ‘democracy’ does not contradict the perfected active life – not that it fosters it. To foster it would mean we would have some clear conception of how to bring activity about through political means” (Den Uyl 1983, 12–13).

<sup>51</sup> TP I, Spinoza 1925, III.282, 284; 2000, 45, 47.

<sup>52</sup> The traditional judgments about politics are framed in morality categories such as justice or the good. But such judgments are arbitrary and confuse our evaluation of politics. Moral claims merely “disguise exhortation as description” and “indicate nothing positive in things, regarded in themselves” (*Ethics* IV, Preface). Yet such illusions are critical to the perspective of superstitious citizens and therefore to the legitimacy of the state (see TP I, II Spinoza 1925, III.274, 279; 2000, 35, 41; and Ep 22). Philosophers must learn to respect the authority of these categories, even while recognizing that they are entirely conventional.

<sup>53</sup> As we have seen, Spinoza wishes to humble philosophers and force them to respect the wisdom of non-philosophic statesmen. To this end, he urges philosophers to contemplate political life objectively as a scientist contemplates natural phenomenon, without imposing moral judgments (TP I, Spinoza 1925, III.274; 2000, 35).

<sup>54</sup> Curley 1991–1992, 41. See also Stanley Rosen: “The state exists as the result of a common agreement by individuals to surrender their power to a sovereign authority for the sake of enhancing each man’s power of self-preservation,” in Rosen 1987, 472.

examination of Spinoza's theology shows that it has been designed to do just that.

Spinoza does not ignore the most common strategy employed by regimes to "persuade" its citizens to obey the law, namely the use of force. But force alone is not enough to ensure the perception of the legitimacy and usefulness of political power.<sup>55</sup> Citizens still retain some measure of power or *ius* even in the face of coercion. To achieve stability, therefore, a state must use other strategies including an appeal to superstition.

### Spinoza's theology

Spinoza's presentation of the political problem helps us understand the critical role of superstition plays in his theological account. It also explains why his theology contains an explicit attack on Scripture as a source of knowledge about God. Spinoza does not hesitate to criticize Scripture as corrupt throughout the TTP:

Those who consider the Bible, such as it is, as an Epistle of God sent to human beings from heaven, will no doubt shout that I have committed a sin against the Holy Spirit – by stating that God's word is faulty, truncated, adulterated, not consistent with itself, that we have only fragments of it, and finally, that the transcript of God's compact that he compacted with the Jews has perished. But . . . God's eternal word and compact, and true religion, are divinely inscribed in the hearts of human beings, that is, in the human mind . . .<sup>56</sup>

The purpose of this critique is to limit the meaning of Scripture by exposing it as a corrupt text written for a largely ignorant audience. Spinoza's account of Maimonides makes clear why he pursues such a damaging critique with such energy. Maimonides had inadvertently expanded the possible meaning of Scripture with terrible consequences; superstitious readers were heartened and persecuted their enemies, often violently. Spinoza's portrait of

<sup>55</sup> TTP 17, Spinoza 1925, III.201; 2004, 191. Power is the result of a dynamic relation between the pursuit of one's *conatus* and the perception of authority. This distinction, according to Steven Barbone and Lee Rice, is presented in Spinoza's work in terms of the contrast between *potentia* and *potestas*: "when Spinoza uses the term *potentia*, he is almost always speaking of the ability or capacity to be able to do something. This ability is an innate ability or operation of the individual who has it; that individual exists and acts because of this power." *Potestas*, on the other hand, is the authority or privilege which permits us to do an action. Citizens always retain their *potentia* even when they transfer authority or *potestas* to the state (Barbone and Rice 2000, 16–17). In Chapter 17 of the TTP, Spinoza links an individual's *potentia* to his essence. Den Uyl shows that Spinoza "conceives political society to be a dynamic process of individual interactions" (Den Uyl 1983, 67). My account follows Den Uyl's explanation of collective power, especially the relation between political institutions and individual *conatus*.

<sup>56</sup> TTP 12, Spinoza 1925, III.158; 2004, 147.

Scripture as a corrupt text prevents us from establishing even Scripture's literal meaning with certainty. This, in turn, forces theologians and religious figures to turn their efforts away from superstitious interpretation toward unearthing the original meaning of the text which has been buried under layers of historical and linguistic data. Though these efforts are unlikely to produce a single, dogmatic interpretation of such an ancient text, Spinoza does not draw this conclusion.

He suggests instead that we can easily identify Scripture's authoritative moral teaching which promises salvation. Scripture's essential teaching concerns moral truths, which can be readily confirmed by our hearts or minds. The ambiguity between hearts and minds is revealing. Although at times the TTP appears to suggest that Scripture's teachings can be discovered or verified by reason, and further, that some prophets and apostles were also philosophers, Spinoza does not build his case for their teachings on their rationality. To the contrary, he provides ample evidence for doubting the truth of revelation.<sup>57</sup> His universal tenets of faith, for example, include the belief in a deity who promises eternal rewards in exchange for obedience to moral law, notions which are clearly inconsistent with his metaphysics.<sup>58</sup> The teachings of Scripture are "effective truths," that is, they are superstitions that have a salutary effect on their adherents. The truth of such beliefs is irrelevant as long as they lead people to act in a kind and charitable fashion.<sup>59</sup> The moral truths in Scripture are in our hearts, that is, they have nothing to do with metaphysics or knowledge:

[W]e conclude that the intellectual knowledge of God which considers his nature just as it is in itself . . . does not pertain to faith and to revealed religion

<sup>57</sup> Spinoza's claim that the apostles were philosophers, who understood and taught philosophical truths in a language that the multitude could grasp, is consistent with Maimonides, who repeatedly asserts the hermeneutical principle that the "Torah was written in the language of the sons of man" (see, for example, *Guide* I.26, 29, 33, 47, Maimonides 1963). By this, he means that in order to understand the meaning of Scripture and the divine law, we must grasp how the law accommodates itself to frailties and practices of the ancient Israelites. To take one example, the Torah's obsession with laws of sacrifice reflects the efforts of Moses to wean the Israelites off of ancient, idolatrous practices by redirecting their practices. See Klein-Braslavy 2006, 137–164.

<sup>58</sup> See Smith 2003; Curley 1990.

<sup>59</sup> Spinoza urges philosophers to accept the intellectual limitations of the multitude in a manner consistent with Christian teachings. To this end, he reminds them of Paul's teaching that "true knowledge is not a command, but a divine gift, and that God asks of man no knowledge [of Himself] other than knowledge of His divine justice and loving-kindness" (TTP 13, Spinoza 1925, III.169; 2004, 156). Spinoza urges men who have been blessed with such a gift not to insist on knowledge as the sole criterion of piety because the "common people, the uneducated multitude" can aspire only to imitate the truly pious by practicing *caritas* (TTP 13, Spinoza 1925, III.171; 2004, 159). This helps explain why the particularities of various superstitions or religion are largely a matter of indifference to Spinoza's philosophers.



in any mode; and, consequently, human beings can err about it astronomically without impropriety.<sup>60</sup>

The notion that one can separate moral from intellectual virtue, or that one can adopt correct moral principles based on a false set of premises, is hardly tenable for philosophers.<sup>61</sup> But Spinoza does not insist that anyone should be forced to accept the intellectual claims. He asks only that philosophers, those who recognize the effective truth of Scripture, adapt their views to the language of Scripture.

Spinoza supplements his theological teachings with political superstitions. The theological teaching of the TTP (Chapters 1–15) prepares the ground for his solution to the political problem (Chapters 16–20), where he builds the case for liberal democracy as the regime which best preserves natural right of equality and freedom. The belief in such rights stands in sharp opposition to Spinoza's metaphysics. The meaning of freedom, for example, is highly suspect if every individual is fully determined by an infinite series of prior causes. Similarly, the belief in equality is also questionable in light of Spinoza's account on the fixed, superstitious disposition of the multitude. Still, such doubts do not mitigate the efficaciousness and widespread appeal of such beliefs. Indeed, given the weakness of reason in political life, the belief in these political superstitions represents the best practical solution to the political problem.<sup>62</sup>

Democracy offers neither moral nor intellectual perfection to the multitude, but this should not blind us to its other virtues. For one thing, it is less harsh than the superstitious, and often violent, manipulation commonly found in theocracies. Instead, it encourages an attitude of toleration of diverse beliefs. Separating reason and revelation into exclusive domains – “there is no connection or relationship between faith, or Theology, and Philosophy” – means that religious beliefs and practices are no longer judged by the standards of reason.<sup>63</sup> Rather than entrust philosophers with the religious or political authority to enlighten the multitude, Spinoza crafts a theology of religious freedom while circumscribing its actual scope or domain of authority.<sup>64</sup> From a Maimonidean point of view,

<sup>60</sup> TTP 13, Spinoza 1925, III.171; 2004, 159.

<sup>61</sup> Philosophers know that such morality is nothing more than the pursuit of self-interest as informed by superstition: TTP 14, Spinoza 1925, III.179; 2004, 166.

<sup>62</sup> See also Frankel, 2011, 55–76. <sup>63</sup> TTP 14 and Preface, Spinoza 1925, III.179, 10; 2004, 166, xxi.

<sup>64</sup> From the TP II, Spinoza 1925, III.280; 2000, 42: “In my lexicon one is altogether ‘free’ only to the extent that one is led by reason. To that extent one’s act are determined by causes that can be adequately understood only by reference to one’s own nature, even as if causes they determine one’s acts necessarily. Freedom . . . does not rule out necessity, freedom presupposes necessity.”

perhaps, Spinoza's toleration represents an attitude of indifference to the intellectual welfare of the multitude. But Spinoza has already shown that the intellectual perfection of the multitude is a self-defeating project; indeed, caring for the multitude is possible only if philosophy abandons the goal of making them rational. His liberal democracy offers an unprecedented level of security and comfort for mankind.

### **Conclusion: Spinoza's enlightenment**

We began our discussion with the disagreement among scholars on the relation between Spinoza and Maimonides: some scholars emphasize Spinoza's kinship with Maimonides, while others focus on the comprehensiveness of his critique. We can now see that these positions reflect the particular elements of Spinoza's treatment of Maimonides in Chapters 5 and 7 of the TTP.

The first attack in Chapter 5 is meant to appeal primarily to Spinoza's Christian audience by presenting the Gospels as more rational than the Hebrew Bible in the sense that it promotes freedom. Despite this difference, Spinoza's overall project of using religion to direct superstitious individuals to act in accordance with reason appears consistent with his account of Maimonides. The difference between the two appears largely rhetorical and theological, that is it reflects the different audiences of the respective works. In fact, Spinoza does not insist on the rationality of Scripture, but only that its essential teaching is freedom from the law. By substituting freedom – a superstition – for rationality, Spinoza radically departs from the Maimonidean project. This difference becomes clear in his second attack on Maimonides, as Chapter 7 exposes a more radical critique. What appears to be a mere disagreement over hermeneutical issues reveals the dramatic failure of the Maimonidean project to enlighten the multitude by making politics and religion more consistent with reason.

In analyzing this failure, Spinoza alludes to the unbridgeable chasm between philosophy and religion or politics. Men are directed by their passions to pursue self-preservation without consulting reason. The absence of reason in nature is apparent in politics as well. The conceptual world of politics rests on a host of inadequate ideas, such as law and freedom. The political ambitions of philosophers like Maimonides consistently fall short because they ignore the limits of reason in political life. Spinoza rejects such utopian projects and suggests instead a set of religious superstitions that contribute to the stability of the regime. The most stable regime is liberal democracy, which is rooted in the most natural and enduring superstitions,

freedom and equality. The virtue of this regime is toleration which, from the point of view of philosophy, represents a studied indifference to the inadequacy of political superstitions.

The seeming contradiction between Spinoza's critiques on Maimonides dissolves therefore when we recognize that Spinoza's political thought eschews the goal of making the multitude rational in favor of the lower, more practical goal of stability and security. This separation of reason from politics allows Spinoza's students to embrace superstitions which have a salutary effect on the multitude. As for theologians and philosophers, Spinoza teaches them to tolerate various theologies as long as they culminate in the practice of *caritas*. This political teaching represents nothing less than the complete rejection of the Maimonidean project of enlightenment.